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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a college summer-enrichment program that helps minority students improve their communication skills. The program concentrates as many different writing experiences as possible into a month-long workshop that provides intensive, individualized, daily writing practice with a variety of instructional materials. The major thrust of the program is first to free students from the inhibitions they might have about college-level composition or creative expression, and then to focus on their grammar and punctuation problems. Seven student writing samples are included for discussion. (RL)

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Tackling the Basics In a Summer Enrichment Program for Minority Students

Mary Jane Dickerson

About eight years ago, I had five Black students in an American Literature survey course at the University of Vermont. Later, somebody pointed out that I had just had a most unique experience since there were only nine Black students on the whole campus. That was the beginning. Shortly afterwards, I began teaching a Literature of Black America course. Since one faculty member knew I had been trying in the summers to remedy what I considered to be a deficiency in my study of American literature, I became one of two to teach large numbers of both students and sections of this course. I remember a day in January when an undergraduate, a native of Winooski, Vermont, came storming out to my house--he had to borrow a car to make the 15 mile trip and he had to go to some trouble to find me at our local outdoor skating rink--to let me know in very irate terms what he thought of a white Southerner, female at that!, teaching that literature course. Well, I survived that onslaught and I continue to survive summer after summer of working with our now considerable numbers of incoming minority students in an Enrichment Program designed to give them intensive help with their oral and written communication in English. From the administrative grapevine, I hear that they do not voice resentment at my being white, female and Southern. In many ways, we share more in our speech and backgrounds that I share with many of my colleagues. I, too, have journeyed from a distant country.

Last summer, after twenty minority students and two teachers had sweltered through a 90 degree plus July together in classrooms

with large windows never designed to be opened, one student, in his evaluation of the Communications Skills course, suggested that one of the basics the University should surely have is air-conditioning. Air-conditioning we will not get, but we will get 20 incoming minority students for the fifth session of the University's Summer Enrichment Program in 1976. They converge on the campus each July, mostly from Northeastern urban areas with a scattering from the rural South. The Program lasts a month and centers around a Communication Skills course with intensive daily workshops in composition; these students spend an hour and a half to two hours writing, evaluating their written work, and discussing various writing techniques and problems as they arise. Since the aim of the month-long session is to prepare them for the writing situations and assignments which they will face in the university academic setting, we try to introduce them to as many writing experiences as possible and also to stimulate them to regard writing as a valuable expression of themselves and their cultural backgrounds. We have used Eschholz, Rosa, and Clark's Language Awareness, the Harbrace Handbook, and other material: Beckett's Film, Margot Barnett's "Black is a Beautiful Woman," a TV tape, and poetry. The University Library staff generously gives the students basic research experience. Accumulated statistics reveal that the students who are able to come in the summer have a better academic record than the minority students who do not attend. That they get to know the campus, some faculty and staff, and each other, probably acts in their favor as much as the academic experience does.

While most of the twenty or so students come from urban areas, they cannot be lumped together. Many are Spanish-speaking Americans of Puerto Rican, Cuban and Jamaican origin; we even have the occasional

Chinese American. In 1976 we add rural Vermonters to the increasing number of Black students from the rural South, my background also. This combination makes both excitement and problems; also, they bring with them an assortment of attitudes and academic backgrounds. Add the capricious Vermont summer weather--either too hot or too cold--and we know again we are all strangers in a strange land.

After three summers of teaching in the Program, I cannot make easy generalizations: I wish I could, because they would have made the preparation of this paper so much easier. Each summer presents its own challenge. But after analyzing the writing samples from past summers, I do see some basic conerns emerge. First, the two groups of students who appear to have more difficulties with written expression are Black students from the rural South and the Spanish-speaking students from the cities. These two groups even share some of the same error tendencies which I shall discuss later. From my experiences in the past ten years with Vermont students, I suspect that the rural Vermonters experience some of the same grammar problems. Second, all of these students possess enormous liveliness and potential in their oral response in the classroom, with the urban Black students the most unselfconscious and dominant. But the urban Black students usually are better able to transmit their oral facility to the written act. Perhaps they are more confident of the worth of what they have to say or, at least, their greater sophistication may have instilled in them a sense of belonging and sharing in what we refer to as "mainstream America." And they demonstrate a heightened awareness of the value in their diversity. They are also the ones who are most

indignant that UVM has no air-conditioning in the classrooms.

Now I am promptly going to confuse what I have just pointed out by using as a beginning basis of my discussion a paper written for the first assignment by a student who is part Black and also Spanish-speaking. His essay illustrates the concreteness of transcribed oral language into written and particular grammar problems. But I had rather have the grammar to deal with and the poetry to work from.

This first writing assignment in the Summer Program was designed to ease the students into writing, to provide a personal basis for their writing, and to introduce all of us to each other. They were asked to describe themselves through the use of the third person, to place themselves in their home settings--concentrating on a street in the neighborhood, the farm or small community. Writing #1 illustrates the vigor of so much of their writing. Its strength lies in its concreteness--the wonderful detail! Something important happens in this piece and the lack of conventional punctuation and spelling and the sometimes awkward sentence structure do not really blur its sense and sound and worth. When this piece of writing was dittoed and open to discussion in a small group, everybody delighted in what the writer pictured about himself, his background and his conception of life in his environment. They were then able themselves to respond about what could be easily done to make the essay clearer and more vivid. This method of having the students discuss the uses and needs for certain marks of punctuation and for spelling words more regularly seemed to work best and they asked later in the session if we could talk about punctuation at some length. My assistant, Molly Mack, a graduate student in

English, made an exercise of sentences for them to work on and she deliberately created sentences involving the students and their activities--it was the summer of "Jaws" and their reactions to that movie made for some humorous examples. They improved enormously in being able to use punctuation marks more effectively; I think it helped for them to recognize a common need and then call for help.

Writing #2 reflects more serious concerns. The writer exhibits stiffness, perhaps caused by the desire to express herself in what she has been drilled to believe is proper expression. Her words are often vague. Her sentence structure is all of a pattern and she often does not put articles with nouns or have verbs and subjects agree in number. Her later writing revealed much confusion with verbs; this difficulty caused her to stick with the verbs "to be" and "to have," rather than to trust herself with even trying to relax and make use of more vigorous verbs that would expand her range of expression. This inhibition has commonly been a feature of the rural student's writing, and I can only speculate about its cause. Certainly the rural Southerner has more of an adjustment to make to come to the University of Vermont in the first place. Since I have also followed the students' work in my position as the tutor for minority students in English for the past four years, I have observed that tense markers trouble many students. What this maze of incomprehension about verb endings does to so many students is to prevent them from trying to use more verbs; I then try my best to minimize the intricacies of verb forms in order to encourage them to search their agile vocabularies for the exciting verb that will

transform the ordinary into the vivid meaning they can recognize is what they wanted to say all along.

The contrast between these two examples disturbs me because, while the first contains some errors that keep the piece from being as splendidly made as it can be, the writer is close to the nuances and rhythms of his language and can readily make his words say exactly what he wants them to say. The second piece of prose is much more difficult and delicate to work from, because the writer is not at ease with what she can do with words on paper. What we try to accomplish during these four weeks to assure these students that they have truly worth while things to say; we encourage them to explore all the possibilities that are already built into their possession of language. We worked with writer #2 in individual sessions to help her develop a variety of sentence patterns based on the way she talked and we urged her to think of verbs as a way she could become more exact in her communication. Also, we helped her to come up with nouns that could anchor her sentences and portray her ideas. She was almost over-endowed with a consciousness of what correctness ought to be, but what she lacked was a confidence to write more nearly the way she communicated orally. The one-to-one instruction that twenty students to two instructors offers is invaluable to the Summer Enrichment Program. A typical morning would see the whole group meeting together, then breaking into 2 separate groups, and finally, the two instructors would work with individuals at the end of the morning.

In writing sample #3, the speaker is of Puerto Rican origin. There are some deviations from usual grammatical constructions and punctuation conventions, but again the writer exhibits an ease with

words. His words are concrete and occasionally exceptionally apt. He quickly mastered some of the conventions he needed for beginning to become an effective writer. He uses "learnt" and "burnt" because those were his pronunciations of the words. Basically he was a good speller and in class somebody pointed out to him that the words usually are sounded so that the "ed" can be heard. He tried the sounds out and never again made that variance in those words. The confusion between the possessive formation of nouns and pronouns was common--as it is in all freshman composition courses--and a brief discussion of the distinctions caused most of these students to avoid this confusion in their writing most of the time.

Writing #4 compares to writing #2 in the unvaried sentence patterns, but the writer is much more exact in what he says; he, too, relies on the verbs "to be" and "to have" primarily and needed to choose more forceful and definite verbs. But this writer achieves meaning through his explicit, yet understated, language arrangement in the final paragraph.

Now I shall try to categorize certain areas of difficulty that a significant proportion of the students share through evidence taken from writing samples from 1972 through 1975. I need to emphasize the limitations of the study: the samples I have are not necessarily representative since not every piece of writing was dittoed for class discussion; therefore, I only have a small number of the total of the writing exercises from the students; also, the writing samples are from only approximately half of the entering minority students of each year's freshman class. And since the

recruitment of minority students has expanded from its early concentration on attracting Black students from the northeastern urban population to include more students from Spanish-speaking and other backgrounds and finally to extend further South for Black students, the samples reflect this constantly shifting minority student population. And this year, with the effort to include rural Vermonters from French-speaking backgrounds, the picture will no doubt shift again.

First, the use of the preposition causes awkward construction, such as "She sounded as of if she had a peaches and cream voice." "Our identity as a group is lost and we are blended into another group in which we are totally different from."

"It makes you feel as of though you've been there a long time." "To go into a different aspect on his living style." Prepositions seem to give most difficulty to Spanish-speaking students and rural Black students. Second, the confused formation of the plural of both verbs and nouns is another common pattern and appears widespread. In addition, the past tense marker is often missing from verbs, but very few students ~~have~~ display really serious problems with verb forms--only one student that I remember ever used the Black English form "be" as in "I be tired." I have heard this form often as students talk to themselves in and out of class, but most of them work towards standard forms of English in their written expression. Writing samples #5, #6, and #7 illustrate the most pressing problems--preposition use, verb tenses, and the really serious problem of sentence structure and internal organization. And sentence awkwardness continues to be far more serious in the

writing of rural Black students and Spanish-speaking students. At this point, I have to interject that these writing problems are shared by most of the students I teach in English 1, the beginning composition course at the University of Vermont, no matter what their academic, economic or cultural backgrounds.

I would like to describe a writing assignment that I believe produced some of the most successful results, even though I have no samples to support my claims. Since the text Language Awareness was the basis of most of the discussion and writing and I felt the need of a change, we saw for a change of emphasis, the TV tape of Margot Barnett's "Black is a Beautiful Woman," in which she recites Black prose and poetry portraying images of Black women from Sojourner Truth's famous speech to Niki Giovanni's poem "Ego Trip." We talked about this presentation, related it to Bosmajian's essay, "The Language of Sexism" and Ossie Davis' "The English Language is my Enemy." Finally, each student chose a poem from many that we provided for their selection. They read their poems to the class and discussed the poem's content and why that particular poem was appealing. After the oral discussion, each student wrote about his or her poem for the overnight assignment. One of the most successful essays was a moving comparison by one writer of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "Negro Hero" to his family's experience when his older brother's body was sent home from Vietnam. Though I had not carefully thought through he implications of the assignment beforehand, I do believe the oral exercise strengthened the writing. The more closely we related the oral to the written, the more chance there seemed to be that the students' writing would be vivid and concrete. I would even go farther and say that generally these students are better able than

most to mine the resources of their rich heritage of oral expression. I should like to make them more aware of what they possess and urge them not to lose this distinction in the process of getting a formal university education. This summer I plan to develop more oral composition as a bridge to the written.

By teaching regularly in the Summer Enrichment Program and following these students as tutor through the school year, I believe I have enough background to speak of their academic performance as it compares to the rest of the students I have class contact with. Also, I work as tutor with many of the minority students who are not able to come in the summer for the Communications Skills course. In that capacity, I have even worked closely with one Native American. Though it may not fit with general expectations, I must emphasize that these students compare favorably with others in the University. About the middle of the month, I quickly devised a simple test for the minority students, made up of the following:

I asked them to give examples of:

1. its, it's
2. their, there
3. ; :
4. accept, except
5. affect, effect
6. sentence containing independent clause and dependent clause
7. compound sentence using co-ordinate conjunction
8. verbs "to lie," "to lay"
9. to, too

Most of them did 6 or more correctly. Last fall, I gave the same quiz to 2 sections of English 50, advanced expository writing. Total scores were about the same.

Instructors do see that minority students come to me for help as they show writing difficulties, but, at the same time, these same instructors have told me that there are others in their classes who need that individual attention as much. One Black student, whom I am now seeing once a week, has pulled up her mark already; her largest single problem is a lack of confidence in herself. Almost all I do with her is to encourage her to go ahead and organize what she wants to say and to start writing. Somehow a warm presence who believes she can write is what she needs to sit down and get started.

Her writing ability is developing as she sees herself writing successfully. This student did not attend the summer Program and she might have benefited from that added experience: the students who do come have the three hours credit from the course and can take only 12 hours in the fall semester, allowing them to concentrate on a reduced load. We are able to give them some advice about their needs in English: some are urged to take English 1; others are advised to take an advanced expository writing course or another offering in literature on the freshman or sophomore level. It would be ideal if all incoming University of Vermont freshmen could have this attention to their needs for English language communication development. An increasing proportion of the incoming freshmen need this advantage as much as the minority students do.

Graduation 1976 will see the first significant minority participation from that long ago Summer Enrichment Program in 1972 when when P. Eschholz first asked me to be his assistan I shall be there, proud of their academic achievement and their courage. We have all made a long journey. Langston Hughes wrote a

poem some time ago which expresses much that I have been trying to say:

Theme for English B

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you---
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what's true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me--we two--you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me--who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white--
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me--
although you're older--and white--
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Langston Hughes

#1

He remembered the first time he ever saw himself in a mirror. He was reminded of the shock when he got up to wash every morning.

He wondered what people did before they had mirrors and became self-conscience and could decide they had a poorly shaped nose. In those days if you had crooked teeth they were adequate if you could chew a hide and rip your hood apart. He looked in the mirror at his braces with the little green pieces of food stock between. In ancient times we thought everyone must have done the same things, lived in the same place and looked like one's parents. He lived in the city and loved the country and knew that if he had lived in the country things would have been the other way around. At least in the old days people didn't have choices. If your father went into the wilderness every day to try to kill something to eat to stay alive you wouldn't have any choice but to do the same. Then some one got smart, stayed in one place and built New York City. He thought about his home, both his father and mother worked for a living in offices. He was determined not to grow up and work in an office. He first became aware of wildlife when he saw a dead pigeon by the east river. Picking it up he spread the wings, holding the bird up to the sky and watched the sun pour through the feathers. The noon day traffic shot by him and the fumes made him dizzy. His friend said, "man you'd better not touch that nasty thing or you'll get deseased."

He grabbed the bird from the boy who was holding it and threw it over the side walk into the river. It floated slowly, grotesquely turning. The gulls glided along and the two boys decided to go smash some parked cars.

* * *

#2

Lucretia is a Southern girl born in South Carolina. She has a face that seems to be pleasing to everyone. Her smile, I think, is a nice and pleasant one also. She has dusty black hair that's medium length. She also wears a flip 1930's style. Lucritia has small feet that become heated quit easily. Her body is one that might be classified in the medium built section. She use some facial gestures. Lucretia walks with grace and style. Her voice is that of a low tone. She has great manners. Her clothes are common every day things. She has pleasing smile. She has displeasing legs.

The place in which Lucretia grew up was the country. She went to the neighborhood school two years and changed to the school in the city. This place is beautiful in Spring, Summer, and Fall. The place is country setting. The houses are large with big rooms. This place also has nice places to have good times and lots of memories.

* * *

#3

"Hey, there goes Victor! Oh! You don't know him, do you. Well, let me describe him to you and later on you can meet him."

#3 (cont.)

"As you can see Vic is not too tall but he certainly is strong. He probably exercises a lot. I heard he likes to play handball a lot too. Even though he's short he can do many things taller people can't do. I can't say whether or not he's handsome but most girls say he's good-looking. When he talks you can see that he's got a lot of self-control because his voice is always calm. When he does get excited, though, his voice squeaks in his rage or emotion. He has several nervous habits. One is biting his nails and the other is pushing up his glasses with the middle finger of his hand.

"He doesn't dress stylishly but he is neat most of the time. His hair never seems to be in the right place; the winds blows it around all the time."

"Vic was originally from New York; but he now lives in New Jersey.

In New York he lived in the South Bronx for nine years. His family was poor when they came here from Puerto Rico and they couldn't move out. He really learnt to take care of himself there in the South Bronx. A person has to know how to take care of himself there or he won't last long.

"Vic lived on a 163rd Street on Southern Boulevard. That certainly was a hot-spot. When he first moved there the neighborhood was beginning to change. The junkies and the prostitutes moved in and little by little almost every building in his neighborhood was burnt down and boarded up. He recently went to visit his old neighborhood and he was pretty disappointed to see his old building burnt down and most of his friends changed beyond recognition.

"After his father and his mother were divorced his family moved to New Jersey. But now they don't seem to settle down. They have moved around a lot. And now he's planning to move again. It will be a shame if he does move but I'm glad I know him now." "Well good-bye now. I'll introduce you to Vic later. Take it easy."

* * *

#4

Leroy is an eighteen-year-old Black. His hair is dark brown and he has a small afro. His is slim and tall. Leroy has light brown eyes. He likes to dress nice and go out a lot. Leroy is quiet at times. He respects others and he likes to observe people around him. He gets along with most people as they respect him. Leroy is very optimistic about life. He is sure of what he wants in life confident that he will suceed.

Leroy grew in Philadelphia, which is a large city. He lives on a small block in North Philadelphia. His neighborhood is all black. In his neighborhood there are projects and there is a lot of crime such as robbery, rape, and murder etc. There are a lot of junkies in his neighborhood. At night he can people outside fighting and arguing. In his neighborhood the summers are boring and hot.

* * *

#5

The Shelburne Museum makes you aware of the historical things in the past. Covering the colonial period from 1790-1967. Exhibiting objects such as the sidewheeler Ticondergoa to "THE BEACH HUNTING LODGE." Which is know to be one of the most interesting parts of the museum. Displaying its Wild Game. The different types of Bears, Fox, Goats, Moose etc. The traps use to capture these animals. The way frontiers live during that time and the tools they use to stay alive and survive. Showing the Indians style of life. Their beds, clothes, fireplaces, bow and arrow, potters, and the traps they use to seize their wild game. Featuring stuff heads of Wild game animals. "The BEACH HUNTING LODGE has all the things seen in television westerns and more. It makes you feel as of though you've live there for a long time. The Beach Hunting lodge (newly constructed in 1961). Made of virgin timber. North America's big tame trophies. Its just one of the parts of places that make The Shelburne Museum a nonprofit, Educational organization. Surrounded by an arboretum of native Vermont trees "The Shelburne Museum located on U.S. route 7 seven miles south of Burlington. Shelburne Vermont.

* * *

#6

She was my chocolate pudding dessert. She looked pretty from the window. She sounded as of if she had a peaches and cream voice. So I hurried upstairs and stood in the doorway. Saw her from the back and she had the shape of steak with big hams. It must have been the bread. That Wonder Bread had built her body 12 ways at least that's the way it look from the back. My chocolate pudding dessert just stood there. I went closer and her hair, thick, like a bush of collards. And she finally turn around and her face was squash and it looked squash with a banana nose and an union mouth.

#7

The definition that the english language gives "Blackness" definatly contributes to prejudice. If people never lear anything favorable about the word black, or if you grew up hearing only the negative side of the word. Such as death, evil, dirty, plague ect. Then you will naturally come to the conclusion that the black people are bad, and you might have something against them. So I feel that the definition of the word "Blackness" definatly contributes to prejudice in this country.